

The Seven Churches – Pergamum
Revelation 2:12-17
ABC 10/10/21

While I enjoy the fruit of blackberry vines, I don't enjoy the vines themselves. I don't know many who do. While blackberries can be found almost everywhere in western Oregon, they aren't native to Oregon. While the true story may be lost to history, the blackberry was probably brought to the Oregon Territory in the mid-1800s either from the Sandwich Islands to be grown at Fort Vancouver or by immigrant settlers on the Oregon Trail.¹ These blackberries now crowd out native species & have *a significant economic impact on right-of-way maintenance, agriculture, park maintenance, & forest production*, according to the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Blackberries currently infest more than 1.6 million acres in Oregon, & have an annual negative economic impact of more than \$40 million.² From its innocent beginnings, it's slowly become a painful pest. In much the same way, compromise is always seeking to infiltrate & take over the local church & choke out it's ministry. Its beginnings always seem small & safe, but it stifles the work of the Spirit in God's people & chokes out the gospel with the twisting vines of a weak, watered down, & worldly message. *Compromise* in the dictionary is defined as, *a concession to something derogatory or prejudicial; to make a shameful or disreputable concession*.³ Compromise is nothing new in the church. We see it happening all the way back in the early church at Pergamum, the 3rd of the 7 churches who were written letters by Jesus Himself in Rev 2-3. The church in Ephesus was orthodox, active, & wise, yet lacked in love. Persecuted & poor, the church in Smyrna suffered but remained faithful to the Lord. The church at Pergamum didn't shine brightly for Christ but allowed their witness to dim to a flicker. How? By compromising their godly standards with the godlessness of their culture. Knowing of their compromise, Jesus sent them a letter that directly confronted their sin & alerts us to the same danger. **12-17**

¹ <https://oregon-berries.com/history/>

² Kale Williams, "A Weedy Scourge: 20 Invasive Plant Species that Cost Oregon Millions," *The Oregonian*, 1/31/20, Oregonlive.com

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compromise>

1. The Charge (12) Just as in the other 6 letters, this one is written to an **angel** or *messenger* of this local church. This messenger is possibly the letter carrier & could be one of the leaders of the church.

2. The City (12) The city of Pergamum was the northernmost of the 7 cities & was the capital of the Roman province of Asia. It was located on a hill about 1,000 ft higher than the plain below it some 15 miles inland & 65 miles north of Smyrna. 19th-century archeologist Sir William Ramsey described it this way: *Beyond all other sites in Asia Minor it gives the traveler the impression of a royal city, the home of authority: the rocky hill on which it stands is so huge, & dominates the broad plain of the Caicus River valley so proudly & boldly.*⁴ The history of Pergamum can be traced back to the 5th century BC. It was a center of learning, medicine, & knowledge. It boasted of a library of 200,000 volumes (all hand-written) & became the home of many priests & scholars who studied there. So impressive was Pergamum's library that Mark Antony later sent it as a gift to Cleopatra. Wanting to build a library rivaling the one in Alexandria, a 3rd century BC king tried to lure the librarian from Alexandria to Pergamum. Unfortunately, the Egyptian ruler heard of the plan, refused to allow the librarian to leave, &, in retaliation, prohibited the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Out of necessity, they developed parchment made out of animal skins for use as a writing material. It's thought that the word *parchment* is taken from the word *Pergamum*. Perhaps most importantly, Pergamum was a city of religious significance. Where Ephesus was the political center of Asia Minor & Smyrna was the economic center of it, Pergamum was the religious center. By the time John wrote Revelation, there was no city in Asia in which the worship of Caesar was stronger, & therefore no place where Christians were in more danger for refusing to sacrifice to the emperor & confess that *Caesar is Lord*.⁵ It had many temples devoted to idol worship & was full of altars & sacred groves. There were temples to Zeus, Athena, Dionysius, & Caesar. Pergamum was the 1st city allowed to erect a temple to a living Caesar in 29 AD & was at the core of the imperial cult. Here, the opposition to Christians who refused to participate in Roman religion was

⁴ William M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*, p 281

⁵ James Montgomery Boice, *Seven Churches, Four Horsemen, One Lord: Lessons from the Apocalypse*, ed. Philip Graham Ryken, p 90

especially intense.⁶ The temple to Asclepius (the god of healing) was one of the most important in the city. A medical school was attached to this pagan cult & the well-known symbol of modern day medicine (a serpent twined around a staff) was its emblem. People came from all over the world to be healed by Asclepius, who was worshipped in the form of a serpent. Sufferers were allowed to spend the night in the temple, while non-poisonous snakes were released. If the sufferer was touched by a snake during the night, it was equivalent to being touched by the god of Asclepius & he'd be healed.

3. The Church (12) of Pergamum is only mentioned here in Scripture. It was most likely founded during the 3-year ministry of Paul in Ephesus while on his 3rd missionary journey. It says in Acts 19:10, **All who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord**. Here in this pagan city was a church, a body of believers, who'd come to know & love Jesus & who'd remained true to His name. It was a good church, because it hadn't denied its faith, even in days of persecution.

4. The Correspondent The author of this letter is identified in vs 12 as **the One who has the sharp two-edged sword**, the simplest description of Jesus in any of these letters. Who is this? As in all of them, it's none other than Jesus Himself. But He identifies Himself differently in each. Here He's **the One who has the sharp two-edged sword** (1:16). Christ's claim to wield **the sharp double-edged sword** is a reference to a broadsword often used in cavalry charges. It was the symbol of Roman authority & justice. The phrase for Roman might was *the law of the sword*. By Christ's opening words He makes clear it isn't the Roman governor but Himself who actually carries out just judgments. It's Jesus' authority as the true & final wielder of the sword that actually will bring justice to the world (Rev 19:15). It's the exalted Christ, not a Roman official, who has true authority. The Roman authorities had the power of death, but not ultimate power. Only Christ is the ultimate wielder of power, &, as we'll see, He'll turn that same sword against the church if they don't repent (16). What's the significance of this picture of Christ to the church in Pergamum? The NT likens the Word of God to a sword in both Eph 6:17 & Heb 4:12. It also predicts the returning Christ will destroy the man of lawlessness with the breath of His mouth (2 Thes 2:8). The same imagery is

⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation: Verse by Verse*, Osborne New Testament Commentaries, p 53

used to picture Christ as Judge & Executioner at His 2nd Coming (Rev 19:15, 21). The imagery combines the force of a warrior & His pronouncement of judgment upon His enemies. This sounds a little ominous for the church at Pergamum & is a less than positive start to Christ's message to them.

5. The Commendation is found in **13**.

It's worth noting the possessive pronoun the Lord employs here: **You hold fast My name, & did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one.** Christ has a claim on this church; it belongs to Him. & that further emphasizes what a colossal sin their compromise was.⁷ What did Jesus commend the church in Pergamum for? He begins by saying He **knew** where they dwelled. Where did they live? They lived **where Satan's throne is ... where Satan dwells.** There have been many suggestions as to what **Satan's throne** was in Pergamum. Some have identified it as the altar of Zeus. Others have connected it with the worship of the god of Asclepius & its snakes. Others point out that Pergamum was a leading center of emperor worship in the province of Asia & thus Satan's throne. Maybe it includes all those reasons. We don't know. But the church in Pergamum was commended, because Jesus knew where they lived. It was a testimony in & of itself that they could exist in such a place. In Smyrna, the **synagogue of Satan** was Jewish; in Pergamum, the throne of Satan was pagan & he used his stronghold in the city to make life miserable for Christians. Jesus also knew they held **fast** His **name**. Again, His **name** stands for all He is, His character, attributes, & revelation of Himself. This church hadn't denied the faith. They didn't deviate from fidelity to Christ, nor turn from the central truths of the Christian faith. But perhaps the major strength of this church was their witness. In all of the pressure, they remained true to Christ. They held firm to Him, lived up to their responsibilities, resisted the lure of their pagan environment, & refused to renounce their faith. While believers in other places might have buckled in the face of such pressure, these Christians are complimented for not renouncing their faith in Him.⁸ Their faithful endurance is embodied in a man named **Antipas**, who Jesus describes as **My**

⁷ John MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church: Timeless Demands from the Lord to His People*, p 94

⁸ Kendall H. Easley, *Revelation*, vol. 12, Holman New Testament Commentary, p 38

witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you. This is all the Bible says about Antipas but tradition has it that he was a disciple of John & was killed around 92 AD. He was a leader in the Pergamum church & he's said to have been roasted alive inside a bronze, bull-like altar at the temple of Diana. The Christians in Pergamum would certainly have known &/or witnessed his death. But even that didn't cause them turn from their faith. Instead, they were commended for remaining faithful even in the face of such evilness. Antipas paid the ultimate price for his refusal to compromise. Because of his faithfulness, the risen Lord commended him by using the title, **My witness, My faithful one.** He was commended with a title used of Jesus Himself (Rev 1:15, 3:14).

The combination of the word for **witness** (*martyr*) with **who was killed** probably helped pave the way for the development of *martyr* to mean a faithful person who's put to death for his faith. In all usages before this, it never means anything more than *witness*, either in a court or in a general sense of giving testimony. But with Antipas the word came to mean *martyr*. This is the transition passages. Because Antipas bore witness by being put to death, he's a *martyr*.⁹ Antipas was an example for the other faithful Christians in the face of the most severe persecution. The note, **where Satan dwells**, frames this vs with the reality that Pergamum is at the heart of anti-Christian pressure. Pergamum is Satan's hometown & he's the true source of the church's troubles. In the midst of those difficult & trying circumstances, the believers continued to **dwell** in Pergamum, a word that speaks of permanent residence as opposed to merely passing through. Despite the persecution & suffering they endured, the believers at Pergamum continued to **hold fast** the **name** of Christ, & **did not deny** the **faith**.¹⁰ How would we measure up? Can we be described by Christ as a faithful witness? I pray that whatever trials & tribulations we face, that we would remain faithful to Christ. I pray that we all could be described by Christ Himself as faithful witnesses. But this church had some problems. The mention of Antipas' faithfulness was also a rebuke to those in Pergamum who were compromising with the world.

6. The Condemnation of the church in Pergamum is found in **14-15**.

⁹ D. A. Carson, "Revelation—Part 5," in *D. A. Carson Sermon Library*, Rev 2:12–29

¹⁰ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Revelation 1–11*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary, p 86

All was not well with this church. After commending them, Jesus told them He had **a few things against** them. Where the Ephesians were strong, this church was weak, mainly in their tolerance of false teachers. They had some in the church who held to false teaching. By allowing false teachers to flourish, the Pergamum church was endangering every member. Rather than testing & rejecting false teachers, they'd accepted people **who hold to the teaching of Balaam**. Jesus unleashes stinging criticism & compares it to **the teachings of the Nicolaitans**. Christ was concerned with these 2 teachings being tolerated at Pergamum. Some were following the teaching of Balaam who was a notorious OT prophet for hire (Num 22-25; 31:16). Fearful of the Israelites, Balak, king of Moab, hired Balaam to curse Israel. After trying unsuccessfully several times to do so, Balaam came up with another plan. If he couldn't curse Israel, he would corrupt them by getting them to compromise. A **stumbling block** is a bait set in a trap, a snare set to catch its prey. Balaam's bait was the beautiful Moabite women put before the eyes of the Israelite men to entice them into sexual immorality. That would then lead to sharing in sacrifices to their false gods. If Israelite men took the bait, they'd be led into the celebrations centered around sacrifices to idols. Num 25:1-2 says, **While Israel remained at Shittim, the people began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab. For they invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, & the people ate & bowed down to their gods** (cf 31:16). Balaam persuaded the women of Moab to intermarry with the men of Israel, pulling them into the idolatrous, immoral culture of Moab. They went back to eating things sacrificed to idols & back to the perverse immorality of idolatry. They were coaxed back into the paganism they'd escaped in Egypt & seduced into a blasphemous union with Satan. **So Israel joined themselves to Baal of Peor, & the Lord was angry against Israel** (25:3). This was a severe & widespread spiritual betrayal. The Lord's chastening of them included the slaughter of 24,000 men (9).¹¹ Like the Israelites who were seduced by Balaam's false teaching, some in the church at Pergamum were lured to compromise & mix with the pagan system around them. This false teaching led some in the church back into the practice of immorality & idolatry, while those who weren't enticed into such sinful practices, apparently looked the other way & tolerated them to do

¹¹ MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, pp 95-96

so. The NT passage that most extensively addresses the issue of **eating food sacrificed to idols** is 1 Cor 8, where Paul makes it clear that the real issue is that Christians aren't to violate their consciences. This eating of food sacrificed to idols in Pergamum wasn't the kind Paul said was permissible in Christian liberty as it was merely meat sold in the market. It was like 1 Cor 6:15-18 & 10 where Paul had said not to participate in the eating at the pagan festivals where you would be sharing in fellowship with idolatry & other sins. Although we have little specific information, the false teachers in Pergamum were leading people astray.

The phrase, **in the same way** (15), indicates the teaching of the **Nicolaitans** led to the same wicked behavior as that of the followers of Balaam. The **Nicolaitans** probably abused the biblical teaching on Christian liberty. The **Nicolaitans** were apparently saying there was nothing wrong with participating in the imperial cult or the idolatrous banquets & festivals that dominated civic life in the Roman world. They taught that Christians were free to live a licentious lifestyle. They joined in pagan festivities & indulged themselves in all sorts of immorality. Apparently, they were saying, *There's nothing wrong with being friendly to Rome. What harm is there in putting a pinch of incense on the altar & affirming your loyalty to Caesar?* Antipas refused to compromise & was killed; but others took the easy way & cooperated with Rome.¹² Whatever their specific heresies were, we know Jesus hated their deeds (2:6), as well as their presence & influence in the Pergamum church. It was intolerable of them to tolerate error & worldliness & immorality in the church because Jesus had died to purify the church & to present her holy & blameless.

As believers today, we're called not to compromise, but to remain committed to Christ & to hold fast His name & the biblical faith. Are you living in such a way that you've compromised? Do you tolerate sin in your life & in your church? If you look the other way when others sin, you're just as guilty as those who practice such things. We bear the responsibility of restoring those who are compromising. Gal 6:1 says, **Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.** & Mt 18:15-20 gives us the process by which we're to attempt to restore those who have compromised & have fallen into sin. But many churches have

¹² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2, p 574

lost sight of emphasizing holy living & striving for righteousness. I pray that each of us would seek to live in such a way that we haven't compromised our faith in Christ, that we haven't compromised the Word of God, that we haven't compromised the truth of the gospel, & that we haven't compromised our testimony to those who do not yet believe. I pray that the condemnation of Jesus against the church at Pergamum would never be a condemnation of ABC. We must remember that it's the calling of the church to cut whatever ties this world has on us & our hearts. We need to fight daily to break the habits of our former lives, training ourselves to hate our once-cherished sins.¹³

7. The Counsel (16) given to the church in Pergamum is in **vs 16**.

The church's tolerance of the false teaching resulted in the extreme danger of bringing Jesus' wrath upon them. While the Ephesians had forgotten how to love, the Pergamum church had neglected to tell the truth. However, the solution is the same: **repent**, change the direction they'd been going & get right with God. It was a command to **repent** or else. **Repent** means to change direction. The word here carries an element of urgency & it calls for an immediate response. It signifies a turning from sin & a turning toward God. Repentance involves 3 things: Contrition of heart; confession of sin; & change in conduct. The entire church was found guilty because they tolerated false teachings & practices rather than following God's Word. To fail to take a strong stance against this was sin & invited God's judgment. The church in Pergamum was given this urgent command to **repent** or else. If they failed to **repent**, Christ would come & make war against them with the sword of His mouth. If the church failed to **repent** they'd face the sword of the Lord's judgment. In essence, Jesus is saying, *Purge the church of these ungodly, immoral influences, or I will do it for you.* Antipas had felt the "sword" of Rome, but the church at Pergamos would feel the sword of Jesus if they didn't repent. Judgment comes to a church when it's disobedient to God's Word. Jesus had introduced Himself as **the one who has the sharp 2-edged sword** (12), so the church couldn't have been ignorant of its danger.¹⁴ The warning is that He'll come quickly & wage war

¹³ MacArthur, *Christ's Call to Reform the Church*, p 98

¹⁴ Wiersbe, p 574

against false teachers & against a church that harbors them. He will clean house like He did in the Temple when He turned over tables & kicked out the moneychangers (Mt 21:12; Jn 2:13-16). This isn't a passive, spineless Jesus. This is the King of kings who warned that apart from repentance, He was coming to do battle & fight false teachers as His enemies. He threatened to unleash the awesome power of His judgment: **I am coming to you quickly, & I will make war against them with the sword of My mouth.** The distinction between **you** & **them** is important here. The Balaam-like & Nicolaitan teachers aren't truly part of the people of God, even though they've succeeded in infiltrating the church of God. This war will be **against them**, meaning the wrath will be directed at the heretics rather than the believers. But it will still be a judgment of the church, because the true followers allowed the false teaching to remain among them.¹⁵ We need to remember when we fall into sin or allow false teaching in the church that we need to come before the Lord with a contrite heart, confess our sin to Him, & make a change in our attitude & actions. We need to replace sinful attitudes & actions with righteous ones.

8. The Challenge (17) Jesus closes His message with a challenge to the overcomers. **17**

Remember the overcomer is defined by John as being a true believer in Christ (1 Jn 5:4-5). Jesus gives 2 promises to the faithful in Pergamum. As in each of the 7 letters, it relates to some aspect of eternal life. Yet few things in the entire book have received such a wide variety of interpretations as the things mentioned here.

1st, He promises to give them **some of the hidden manna**. **Manna** was the honey-flavored bread that God fed the Jews during their years of wandering in the wilderness (Ex 16:14ff). It's identified as **the hidden manna**, possibly a cryptic reference to the fact that Moses had placed a jar of manna within the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle (Ex 16:33-34; Heb 9:4). Jewish tradition held that this manna had been miraculously preserved & would be multiplied to feed God's people when the Messiah came (Ex 16:32-35; 2 Macc 2:5-7). Later in Rev, the wedding supper of the Lamb (19:9) similarly symbolizes eternal life. A person would be able to eat of that manna only if a way could be opened to the presence of God, which is what Jesus did for those

¹⁵ Osborne, p 58

who believe on Him & trust in His atoning death & resurrection for them. Another way of viewing this is that Christians would have known that Jesus referred to Himself as the true manna, or bread, that came down from heaven (Jn 6:33, 35). So the **hidden manna** may represent Jesus as the Bread of Life (Jn 6:48-51) & symbolize all the benefits & blessings of knowing Him. But more than likely, in this context, it refers to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb described in Rev 19:7-9, where the church is presented as the bride of Christ. If this is the case it refers to this future victory celebration. To eat of the hidden manna is to have fellowship at Jesus' table, to dine with Him as one welcomed into His family.

2nd, they'll be given a **white stone**. Nowhere else in Scripture does it reference this. What's it mean?

There are several possible options it may symbolize or be. Here are just 3 it could refer to:

1. the jewels in the breastplate of the high priest
2. the white & black stones placed in a bowl during a trial to vote for guilt/acquittal
3. the white stones with names on them as a kind of ticket given to victorious athletes for admission to celebrations

Of these, the one that seems to fit the context best is the last one, the Roman custom of awarding white stones to the victor in athletic contests. A white stone, inscribed with the athlete's name, served as his ticket to a special awards banquet. Christ promises the overcomer entrance to the eternal victory celebration in heaven by giving them a white stone meaning that admission to heaven is absolutely sure for believers in Christ.¹⁶ This seems to continue the idea of the messianic feast as reward to the victors in the race of life (Heb 12:1-3).

Someone invariably wants to know what the secret name is. The whole point is that **no one knows**. It's no doubt a name of personal affection & honor, one that marks out God's triumphant overcomers & reflects His love for His children. Or the **new name** could be the name of Jesus inscribed on the stone. In 19:12, we're told that when Jesus returns He'll have **a name written on Him which no one knows except Himself**. But the letter says this name will be unknown except to the one **who receives it**, which would be believers themselves. This means that like Christ, we too will have a new name, an identity linked with our victory over sin in this world. It seems to be a

¹⁶ Easley, pp 39-40

symbol of the personal & intimate relationship that believers will experience with Jesus in heaven. This name will uniquely reflect God's special love for & adoption of every true child of His. Our final reward will be a new name, a new body, & a new heavens & new earth. Newness will characterize the start of eternity (Rev 21:5). What a blessing to the true believer in Christ, a promise of participation in the eternal victory celebration with the Lord in heaven.

How can we keep ourselves & our church from unhealthy compromising? Recalling these 3 things will help:

- 1) Compromise never happens quickly. It begins inconspicuously & inoffensively. Stop glancing at sin & look to Jesus & His Word instead.
- 2) It always lowers the original standard. Compromise never exalts, only lowers; it never uplifts, only debases; it never enhances morality, only erodes it. Watch out for concessions to God's standards. They'll always lead to sin.
- 3) Compromise is the 1st step toward total disobedience. It's a slippery slope. Fortunately, with God's help & a repentant spirit, compromise can be stopped. Turn from your sin & claim God's promises of forgiveness & renewal.

How might we as believers compromise today? We may compromise our faith & witness by how we speak, by how we spend our time, by what we teach, or by what we fill our minds with. This message to the compromising church in Pergamum should motivate us toward an intolerance of false teaching, an intolerance of immorality, a practice of church discipline, an examination of our own lives striving to pursue spiritual maturity, & an anticipation for the return of Christ. If Jesus were to examine your life today would He call you, **My witness, My faithful one**? Let's be careful not to compromise our faith & witness. Instead, let's stay true to Jesus & His Word looking forward always toward future blessings!